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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000163

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEADERS'
TRIP TO THE U.S.

REF: A. MINSK 150
[1](#)B. MINSK 162

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The delegation of leading Belarusian political and civil society activists to the U.S. will provide USG policy makers an insightful and balanced view of the current state of affairs in the democratic opposition camp. The Lukashenko regime's desperate struggle to adapt to significantly higher energy prices has put the opposition in a unique position to broaden popular support for democratic change. However, opposition coalition members, including de facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich, remain locked in a bitter struggle over questions of leadership and planning for another democratic congress. Milinkevich was supposed to lead the Belarusian delegation to the U.S., but at the last minute he pulled out, citing "irreconcilable differences" with the opposition party leaders. The delegation, which nevertheless consists of the most active political party and civil society representatives, will have an opportunity to hear from key USG officials on the need to work together and quickly to capitalize on the regime's weakness. End Summary.

Belarusian Delegation Represents Diverse Viewpoints

[1](#)2. (C) Despite de facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich's last-minute withdrawal from the February 25-March 2 trip to the U.S., the current composition of the delegation is truly representative of the democratic forces in Belarus. Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) head Vintsuk Vyachorka, United Civic Party (UCP) head Anatoliy Lebedko, and Belarusian Communist Party (BCP) head Sergey Kalyakin are the leaders of the largest opposition political parties in Belarus (with each party having a membership base of 1000-3000 activists). Irina Kozulina is the wife of the most well-known political prisoner in Belarus, former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin, and has led an effective public campaign seeking the release of her husband and other political prisoners. Sergey Matskevich, head of the Assembly of Belarusian Democratic NGOs, represents an umbrella organization that coordinates the activities of 220 independent NGOs. Thus, the delegation members will be able to provide Washington policy-makers with a comprehensive assessment of the prospects for democratic change and what the international community can do to strengthen our support for the freedom fighters.

Key Challenges Facing Belarusian Opposition

13. (C) The Belarusian democratic forces, including the NGO community, are in the process of trying to figure out how to respond to the potential economic crisis caused by Russia's decision to increase oil and gas prices for Belarus and trade disputes with Russia (e.g., Belarusian sugar exports). (Note: Most recently, the GOB requested a USD 1.5 billion "stabilization loan" from Russia to help mitigate the effects of higher energy prices. End note.) Opposition coalition and civil society leaders know that they must develop and disseminate an alternative vision for Belarus to convince Belarusians to actively support democratic change. They also know that they need to develop an action plan to disseminate the alternative vision and mobilize democratic-minded Belarusians. However, the coalition and most civil society groups remain paralyzed by at least three issues (see refs A and B for more detailed assessments):

-- Coalition Stuck on Leadership Issues. Milinkevich has publicly announced that he will boycott the upcoming congress of democratic forces, tentatively scheduled for March 17-18, on the grounds that the coalition aims to displace him as leader and that the current make-up of the congress leaves out the important role of civil society and non-party activists. Party leaders Lebedko and Kalyakin have said publicly and privately that in the absence of presidential elections there is no need for a single coalition leader, but they recognize that coalition activists in the regions are demanding that the party leaders reach a compromise with Milinkevich. Vyachorka, who played an active role in securing Milinkevich's presidential nomination in the October 2005 democratic congress, has shown more flexibility on the issue of leadership, but he is deeply frustrated with

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Milinkevich's blatant efforts to recruit BNF regional activists for his own "For Freedom" movement. NGOs, including those in the Assembly of Democratic NGOs and prominent human rights group Charter97, support Milinkevich's bid to retain his title as opposition leader, but they are disappointed with Milinkevich's lackluster performance as a leader.

-- Absence of an Alternative Vision or Action Plan. Although coalition leaders say that in principle they agree on a message that would stress close ties with Russia and the West, they remain at loggerheads on the details of an alternative vision for Belarus. Similarly, the action plan would most likely focus on preparations for the 2008 parliamentary elections and 2011 presidential elections, but the parties have yet to reach a consensus on specific actions or activities. (Note: The parties are hoping that with additional pressure placed on the regime by Russia and the West, Lukashenko may be more open to allowing genuinely democratic elections. End note.)

-- Distrust Between Parties and NGOs. Party and civil society leaders recognize that following the 2006 presidential elections, there has been little cooperation and coordination of activities. Party leaders generally view NGOs as feckless and spineless organizations, citing most NGOs' decision not to participate in the January 2007 local elections or collect signatures in support of a democratic message during the local election campaign as examples. Leading NGOs tell us that the parties' "obsession" with preparing for elections has not and will not broaden public support for democratic change. Milinkevich, who is clearly heeding the counsel of civil society leaders like Charter97's Andrei Sannikov and Dmitriy Bondarenko, seems determined to boycott the congress and withdraw from the coalition in an effort to build a broader civil society movement. The political parties and NGOs are hopeful that they will be able to collaborate effectively on the March 25 demonstration (celebrating Belarus' first brief period of independence).

Our Message to the Delegation

14. (C) USG officials should raise the following points during discussions with the Belarusian opposition delegation:

-- We applaud your efforts to reach a compromise with Milinkevich; keep up the communication.

Background: Party leaders and Milinkevich must understand that they need each other if the coalition is to remain intact. Moreover, deputy party leaders tell us that the party chiefs must demonstrate to party activists in the regions, where support for Milinkevich is strongest, that the parties have done everything they could to maintain unity within the coalition. This way, if Milinkevich were to pull out of the coalition completely, his departure would not grind to a halt the parties' plans to reach out to more Belarusians. (Note: On February 22, Milinkevich and the party leaders could only agree -- following a three-hour meeting -- that it was important to find a mutually beneficial solution. End note.)

-- Developing a concrete action plan, that incorporates views of both parties and NGOs, is a challenging but necessary task. You need to decide what it is you want and lead others in reaching that goal.

Background: Party leaders admit that incorporating the views of leftist parties such as BCP and rightist parties such as BNF into a common message for democratic-minded Belarusians has been an arduous undertaking. You should stress to them that the coalition, regardless of Milinkevich's participation, should quickly reach a consensus on an alternative vision and action plan while the regime is focused on averting an economic crisis. The coalition should be willing to do whatever it takes to regain the momentum that it lost after the 2006 presidential elections.

-- Political parties and NGOs have distinct roles. Where possible, you should collaborate on some projects and work independently on others.

Background: The group needs to hear from Washington interlocutors that there are various ways to promote democratic change in a country, and political parties and NGOs both play essential roles. While each group may have a

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particular approach to mobilizing people, events such as the planned March 25 and April 26 demonstrations serve as excellent opportunities for collaboration. The Assembly of Democratic NGOs should also consider playing a more active role in mobilizing civil society groups to work together with political parties on certain projects.

-- The U.S. was proud to raise the unjust imprisonment of Kozulin and other political activists in the UNSC and other fora; we will continue to press the GOB on this issue.

Irina Kozulina is extremely grateful for the USG's repeated calls for the release of her husband and other political prisoners in Belarus. Kozulin ended a 53-day hunger strike on December 11 following our assurances that we would raise his case in the UN Security Council. The USG and EU have made clear that the starting point of any substantive dialogue with the Belarusian regime is the release of all political prisoners.

Issues They Will Raise

15. (C) The delegation may seek a response from USG officials on the following issues:

-- Financial Support for Congress. Coalition leaders have maintained close contact with U.S. NGOs International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute, and National Endowment for Democracy. We support these NGOs' position that the United States condition financial assistance on the development of a more focused and inclusive forum. Also, the coalition leaders should agree on an alternative vision and action plan.

-- More Support for Independent Media. The USG is always willing to consider project proposals. For example, the Embassy's Small Grants Program, including the Media Development Fund, constantly receives and approves proposals to strengthen and expand independent media outlets.

-- Current USG Plans For Additional Sanctions. The USG is still exploring its options. In addition to possibly widening visa ban and asset freezes on particular individuals, we are also considering economic sanctions. However, we are consulting with our European colleagues on this and other punitive measures. Regardless, the GOB would be warned ahead of time and the regime would have some time (but not much) to begin making needed political and/or economic reform to avoid stronger sanctions. The Belarusian delegates are generally supportive of tougher sanctions, although some may disagree on economic sanctions.
Stewart